

Developing a Romance Expert in Your Store

by Stephanie Bond

You have a leak. So you go to your local home improvement store in search of a plumbing doo-hickey. But you're not exactly sure what the plumbing doo-hickey is called. When you ask for assistance, the employee shrugs. "All the plumbing doo-hickeys are on aisle seven," he says. "Good luck."

On aisle seven you are faced with row after row of plumbing doo-hickeys, all of which look pretty much the same, but all a little different, too. You feel overwhelmed. You might stumble across the plumbing doo-hickey you want, but how long will that take? Frustrated, you leave and drive across town to another home improvement store. This time when you make your doo-hickey request, the store's 'plumbing expert' is called forth to interpret your description. The plumbing expert listens, then nods happily and *viola!*, the doo-hickey you want materializes. The plumbing expert also gives you tips on how to install the doo-hickey and what other supplies you might need. You leave, one happy doo-hickey customer. The next time you need lawn supplies, ceiling fans, paint, et cetera, you will definitely take your business to the second store. Although it's farther away, you know you'll always get good advice, and you want to spend money with people you trust.

Now let's say a potential romance reader walks into your bookstore. She used to read romance novels when she was a teenager, but fell out of habit once she entered college and started her career. Lately she's realized how much she misses reading, but she doesn't know where to start. She walks up to an employee in your store and asks for assistance in picking out a good romance novel, but the employee shrugs. "Our romance section is on aisle seven. Good luck."

On aisle seven the customer is faced with row after row of romance novels, all of which look pretty much the same, but all a little different, too. She feels overwhelmed. She might stumble across a book she wants to buy, but how long will that take? Frustrated, she leaves and drives across town to another bookstore. This time when she makes her request, the store's 'romance expert' is called forth to assist her. "Do you remember the authors or titles of romance novels you use to read?" she asks. "What kinds of movies do you like? Do you enjoy history or more contemporary stories? Do you like humor?" The romance expert listens to the customer's replies, then nods happily and *viola!*, not one, but several books the customer will probably enjoy materialize. The romance expert also gives the customer tips on sequels and great websites to learn more about romance novels and authors. The customer leaves, one happy romance reader.

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The next time she needs a romance novel for herself, a business book for her husband, a computer book for her teenager, a storybook for her preschooler, she will definitely take her business to the second store. Although it's farther away, she knows she'll always get good advice, and she wants to spend money with people she trusts.

In short, you need a romance expert working in your store. Why a 'romance' expert versus a 'mystery' expert or a 'computer books' expert or a 'children's literature' expert? Because if you foster a clientele of women who read romance novels, you are fostering a customer who will visit your store more frequently and purchase more per visit. A romance reader also typically controls the purse strings of the family, and since she's a reader herself, is more likely to purchase books instead of toys or other types of gifts for her loved ones.

How can you develop a romance expert in your store? Here are a few tips.

1. Set goals for the project. Increased traffic? Increased sales? Increased store profile? Set before and after 'numbers.'
2. Ask for a volunteer. Sheer enthusiasm is a key ingredient to getting customers excited about the wonderful world of romance novels.
3. Give that employee status—a title, a name badge, a special vest, a poster in the store with his/her picture on it, a desk or special work area for their files, et cetera.
4. Help your expert network. Contact the RWA home office to get the name of the local chapter that's nearest your store. Call the president of the local organization and ask for their assistance in getting your romance expert up to speed. Perhaps your employee can become an associate member of the organization and attend regular meetings.
5. Help your expert further their romance education. Subscribe to romance review magazines so your expert can learn more about the sub-genres of romance (such as time travel romance) and so he/she will always know what new titles are coming out.
6. Ask your expert to compile recommended reading lists.
7. Give your expert creative license. Challenge them to arrange a romance 'event' and give them a small budget to work with.
8. Provide the resources for your expert to start a romance reader group, and perhaps a newsletter as well.
9. Ask your expert to sit in on buying sessions with sales reps.
10. Send your expert to a romance-related reader/writer conference.
11. Move the romance section to a prominent area of your store and supply your expert with a bulletin board or other wall space to display romance covers and news of interest to romance readers.
12. Monitor the results of the project closely so you quantify the successes. Share the results with your expert and regularly evaluate your goals. ~**SBond**

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